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Exploring Dylan Thomas' Wales

By Monique Burns · in Destinations ·



MONIQUE BURNS

Monique Burns is a Contributing Editor to JaxFax magazine, a national publication for U.S. travel agents. A former Travel & Leisure Senior Editor, she specializes in Europe, where she has experienced Helsinki's oldest wood-fired sauna, hiked the Swiss Alps, sampled beer and chocolate in Belgium, and marveled at Byzantine cave art in Turkey's Cappadocia. Elsewhere here on the globe, Monique has trekked Morocco's High Atlas and surveyed the peaks of China's Zhangjiajie, a UNESCO World Heritage Site that inspired the movie "Avatar."

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From moon-shaped bays and hummocky green hills to storied castles and monuments, the glories of Wales have been extolled for centuries by poets, musicians and dramatists. But the greatest of all was Dylan Thomas, author of classics like "Fern Hill" and "Under Milk Wood." To celebrate Thomas' 100th birthday in 2014, the Dylan Thomas 100 Festival of poetry readings, plays, art exhibits and walking tours is slated for London, New York, and Wales, namely Swansea, the poet's birthplace, and Laugharne, the poet's final home before his untimely death at age 39. Go to Wales now or later, but whenever you decide to visit, celebrate Dylan Thomas in the lively pubs, memorabilia-filled homes and splendid seaside villages he immortalized.



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At London's Heathrow Airport, take the 30 minute express train to Paddington Station. Then transfer there for the two hour journey west to Cardiff, the Welsh capital, to explore Cardiff Castle, browse through bustling Cardiff Market and gaze at archaeological finds in the National Museum. Then hop another train and head an hour west to Swansea, the poet's birthplace.

With its broad, sandy bay and notorious waterfront bars, its tree shaded hills and smokestack-fretted skyline, Swansea was the "ugly, lovely town" of Thomas' youth. A mighty metallurgical capital, with a big harbor just miles from England, Swansea was repeatedly bombed by the Nazis. After a three day blitzkrieg in 1941 leveled more than 800 buildings, Thomas lamented the loss of many treasured haunts. But, thankfully, some remained.

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In Swansea's renovated Maritime Quarter, steps from the harbor, book a room at stately Morgans Hotel. The Port Authority's former brick and limestone headquarters now features luxurious rooms with polished woodwork and high ceilings, an elegant dining room and a spacious column-lined bar.

Around the corner at The Dylan Thomas Centre, a permanent exhibit displays the poet's manuscripts, photos and other memorabilia, including the borrowed, ink-stained suit he wore on his fatal lecture tour in New York in 1953. The center's bookstore stocks copies of Thomas works and CD's, plus excellent guidebooks like *The Dylan Thomas Trail*, a four part series, and *Dylan Thomas: Swansea, Gower and Laugharne* by James A. Davies (University of Wales Press, 2000).

The Centre is also the site of the annual, two week Dylan Thomas Festival, October 27–November 9. Reflecting Thomas' reputation as both a distinguished man of letters and a beer swilling roustabout, the festival is similarly eclectic.

One night I hear Gillian Clarke, the distinguished white-maned National Poet of Wales, reading from her newly penned story inspired by Thomas' "A Child's Christmas in Wales." Another night, the Bluestocking Lounge stages an uproarious burlesque show alternating bawdy striptease acts with snatches of poetry.

It's a short walk to the waterside where, in Dylan Thomas Square, a bronze statue of the seated poet overlooks a yacht filled marina. Here, too, is the Dylan Thomas Theatre, once the Swansea Little Theatre, where the poet performed as a teenager. Rising above it all is the contemporary Meridian Tower, where the Grape & Olive restaurant serves up Welsh specialties like fish pie, and *cawl*, a hearty lamb stew. Sample the country's finest ales and drink in fabulous 360 degree views of the "harp shaped hills" and "water lidded lands" that inspired Thomas.

In the hilltop enclave of The Uplands is the Dylan Thomas Birthplace, a stucco and brick Edwardian style "villa." From the second floor guest room, where the poet was born, enjoy splendid views of Swansea Bay. In the downstairs parlour, with its brick fireplace guarded by white ceramic poodles, a shiny brass gramophone and flowered sofa, "the uncles snoozed" in Thomas' famous reminiscence in, "A Child's Christmas in Wales." You can rent the entire four bedroom house for a day or longer. Or just ring up homeowner Geoff Haden and pop in for a tour.

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Steps away is Cwmdonkin Park, which Thomas fondly recalled as “a world within the world of the sea town.” Guarded by enormous yew trees like a sacred Druidic site, the rolling greens are dotted with huge oaks. The cast iron fountain that Thomas and his playmates drank from is still there. Beside a gentle rill, shaded by weeping willows, a memorial boulder is inscribed with the final verse of “Fern Hill.”

In *The Uplands*, the poet’s upwardly mobile father sought middle class respectability. But, down near the waterfront, Thomas came of age. Steps from Morgans Hotel, Dylan worked at the *South Wales Evening Post* for a year as a cub reporter before devoting himself entirely to poetry. The newspaper offices have moved but around the corner, the Queens Hotel, a pub Thomas and fellow reporters frequented, remains. Since Dylan’s day, when the “shilling women” wrote the price of their favors on the soles of their shoes, much has changed. But the long burnished wood bar remains and Gary, the proprietor, plans to class up the joint by decorating the walls with Dylan Thomas verses.

Facing Morgans, Wind Street, once chockablock with wine merchants, is now lined with several blocks of pubs. On a Saturday night, the No Sign Wine Bar, another Thomas watering hole, is a people watcher’s paradise packed with young men in tee shirts and black leather jackets and young women tarted up in skintight mini-dresses and spandex.

Mumbles—or as purists put it, *The Mumbles*—is about five miles west of Swansea. Facing the bay, the town’s single main street is lined with inns, restaurants and pubs, including The Antelope, another Dylan Thomas haunt. Mumbles is the gateway to the Gower Peninsula, chosen as the U.K.’s first “Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty” in 1956. It’s rimmed with more than a dozen bays and another dozen sandy beaches. As a boy, Thomas camped here with his family. As a teenager, he romanced local girls on the golden sands of Langland and Caswell Bays, and climbed the limestone cliffs at Rhossili. Today, visitors surf, ride horses, kayak and mountain bike here. They also hike the 35 mile Gower Way, which crosses the peninsula, or the 39 mile Gower leg of the 870 mile Wales Coastal Path, the first trail to encircle an entire country.

An hour west of Swansea lies the village of Laugharne—pronounced “larn”—where Thomas spent the last four years of his life. He delighted in the “legendary lazy little black magical bedlam by the sea” whose splendor also captivated Samuel Coleridge and Mary Wollstonecraft, feminist author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* and mother of *Frankenstein* author Mary Shelley.

Smack in the middle of town at Browns Hotel, Thomas held court daily, while seated in a bay window, sipping ale and playing cards. The 14 spacious upstairs rooms have all been recently renovated as have those at another Thomas haunt, The New Three Mariners Inn.



Photo: The Robert Titley Consultancy

Thomas rented lime green Pelican House across the street for his elderly parents. In 1951, inspired by his dying father, Thomas wrote the poem, "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night," urging him to "Rage, rage against the dying of the light." Two years later, Dylan's own body lay in state here before being buried under a simple white cross in nearby St. Martin's Churchyard.



Photo: The Robert Titley Consultancy

Also across from the hotel, Corran Books is presided over by the leonine George Tremlett, who wrote a 1991 Dylan Thomas biography and co-wrote a 1986 autobiography by Caitlin Macnamara, Dylan's golden haired wife and muse. In the tell-all book, which details the couple's enduring love as well as their frequent infidelities and drunken brawls, Caitlin recalled spending the happiest years of their marriage at Sea View, a yellow and white house around the corner.

It's a short walk to the River Taf Estuary, guarded by 12th century Laugharne Castle. In adjacent Castle House, novelist Richard Hughes wrote his 1929 bestseller *A High Wind in Jamaica*. In the house's gazebo, Thomas later wrote his short story collection, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*. Here the two writers and their wives often entertained guests like Welsh painter Augustus John, who, years earlier, seduced a teenaged Caitlin to pose for a portrait.



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Just beyond Castle House in his whitewashed Writing Shed, Thomas wrote his famous play for voices, *Under Milk Wood*, while contemplating cattle across the estuary on Sir John's Hill. Bob Stevens, a gentleman farmer who keeps cattle there, has laid out a two mile hilltop trail that's modeled after the 30th birthday walk Thomas recounted in "Poem in October." From the hill you can see clear across the estuary's opalescent blue waters rimmed, as Thomas put it, with "mussel pooled and heron priested" shores.



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Steps away on a cliff just above the estuary is The Dylan Thomas Boathouse, the "seashaken house" where the poet lived with his wife, three children and dog Mably. Visit the small parlor with its coal fireplace and humble 1940's furniture and watch films about Dylan Thomas in an upstairs bedroom. Have tea and a slice of currant-filled Welsh cake on the slate terrace. Then hie back to Browns, as Dylan Thomas would have done, to gossip with the locals, while downing a couple pints of ale with the same "brass bright depths" and "live white lather" that inspired the poet.



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www.americas.visitwales.com

The area code for Wales is 44.

Where to Stay, Eat & Drink:

Parc Thistle Hotel - Steps from Cardiff Castle, find well-appointed rooms, and a popular restaurant, The Social, for well-wrought Welsh comfort food. Park Place, Cardiff CF10 3UD, (0871) 376 9011. www.thistle.com

Morgans Hotel - Luxuriate in elegant rooms, and enjoy a spacious bar and an excellent restaurant. Adelaide St., Swansea SA1 1RR, (01792) 48 48 48. www.morganshotel.co.uk

Queens Hotel - Patronized by young Dylan, the pub is still going strong. Gloucester Place, Swansea SA 1 1TY, (01792) 521 531.

No Sign Wine Bar – Swansea's oldest pub is a no-nonsense place for partying and people-watching. 56 Wind St., Swansea SA1 1EG, (01792) 465 300.

Grape & Olive - Welsh lamb, seafood and ales plus panoramic views. Meridian Tower, Trawler Rd., Swansea SA1 1JW, (01792) 462 617. www.swansea.grapeandolive.co.uk

Browns Hotel – Book a stylish room, then lift a few pints with the locals. King Street, Laugharne SA33 4RY, (01994) 427 688. www.browns-hotel.co.uk

The New Three Mariners Inn – Along with six refurbished rooms come bountiful breakfasts with sublime Welsh bacon. Victoria St., Laugharne SA33 4SA, (01994) 427 426.

What to See and Do:

Dylan Thomas 100 Festival - Celebrating the poet's 100th birthday in 2014 with scores of events in Wales, London and New York. www.dylanthomas100.org

“Dylan Country” Tours - Swansea and Laugharne walking tours are offered by lively Anne Haden (www.anniefromwales.com). Van tours of South Wales are provided by Mike Davies of Dragon Tours (www.dragon-tours.com). In 2014, Literature Wales (www.literaturewales.org) offers 17 unique day and overnight tours, including bus, boat, carriage and horseback rides.

The Dylan Thomas Centre – Home of the annual Dylan Thomas Festival, it has an excellent permanent exhibit and bookstore. Somerset Pl., Swansea SA1 1RR, (01792) 463 980. www.dylanthomas.com

Dylan Thomas Birthplace - The Edwardian-style “villa” is crammed with period furniture and memorabilia. 5

Cwmdonkin Dr., Swansea SA2 ORA, (01792) 472 555.
www.5cwmdonkindrive.com

Dylan Thomas Boathouse – Visit the poet's last home and his nearby Writing Shed. Dylan's Walk, Laugharne SA33 4SD, (01994) 427 420. www.dylanthomasboathouse.com

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